

Preaching the Mysteries of the Reign of God

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To preach Christ from the Gospel of Mark is to preach paradox and mystery. If it is the case that the gospel creates a world through which we experience the reign of God, this Gospel's world is a strange one indeed: shocking, incongruous, even irrational. Announced by the proclamation of a wild man in the desert, Jesus bursts onto the scene without so much as a visiting wise man or shepherd, or even an angelic host singing glory to God. He is marked by the Spirit at his baptism, only to be set on course to his death. Jesus is called "Teacher," and yet his pedagogical preference for cryptic parables results more often in perplexity than in clarity. His demonstration of power—over nature, illness, and demons—prompts wonder and amazement among his followers but does not give the full story of his identity or his mission. He relieves the suffering of others yet teaches his followers that suffering will be their fate. Even after the crucifixion, instead of appearing at a post-resurrection reunion with his disciples, he is absent from the scene, leaving the women to flee his tomb in terror.¹ According to the Gospel of Mark, at almost every turn, Jesus' revelation of the reign of God is characterized by incongruity, mystery, and surprise.

In this essay I outline some of the mysteries inherent in Mark's picture of Jesus and reflect upon how that picture

impacts the task of preaching. Who is Jesus according to Mark, and how might the contours of this image help (or frustrate) those who preach Mark for the church? The sketch offered here assumes that Jesus' identity and purpose, as well as his demands on his followers, are reflected in his initial proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15 NRSV). The challenges for preaching from Mark's Gospel are heightened with the realization that Jesus' ministry in this Gospel reveals the mystery of the eschatological reign of God but does not guarantee its reception. Examination of Jesus' proclamation and practices will show us how preaching that remains true to Mark's depiction of Jesus transforms distinctions between insiders and outsiders, reverses the status quo, and might leave many hearers mystified.

We begin with a brief look at the opening of Mark and how that opening sets the stage for the characterization of Jesus that develops over the course of the narrative. Next, we focus on six paradoxes or mysteries that point us to the nature of Jesus' identity in Mark: the mystery of baptism, the mystery of teaching, the mystery of

1. This assumes the short ending of Mark, at 16:8.

power, the mystery of suffering, the mystery of boundaries, and the mystery of absence.

The following reflections are only suggestive, intended to prompt further questions rather than assert answers. I am dependent upon the careful work of others whose range of vision is wider-angled than mine.² I approach the task from my perspective as a seminary professor who, although trained in the arts of ministry, finds herself standing more often in front of a chalkboard than behind a pulpit. Let the reader understand!

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ

My former homiletics professor, David Bartlett, asserts that “the safest—and most daring—way to discern and proclaim God in Christ is to see and proclaim through the lens of specific biblical texts.”³ This means that whenever we preach from the Gospel of Mark, *Mark's* version of the gospel ought to shape our proclamation.⁴

To be sure, we preach Christ, not the text; yet, in every interaction with this (or any) particular biblical text we may experience a fresh encounter with Christ. It makes a difference, for instance, that Mark contains nothing about the preexistent Logos who, in the beginning, was with God and who was God and who became flesh and lived among us (John 1:1, 14). Mark's prelude to Jesus' ministry is silent about Joseph the carpenter and his betrothal to a young woman named Mary; it says nothing about a miraculous birth celebrated by shepherds (only in Luke) or sages from the East (only in Matthew). Instead we are thrust directly into the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (1:1),⁵ immediately into a cycle of prophecy and fulfillment, from Isaiah, through John the Baptist, to Jesus—who announces the gos-

pel of God: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15).

The narrative style of Mark mirrors Jesus' actions in Mark—a singleminded, undistracted urgency of preaching, practicing, and embodying the mysteries of the reign of God. The eschatological battle foretold in Israel's scriptures is already won, even as its final consummation is not yet complete. Of this Mark seems sure. Mark's abrupt beginning illustrates the radical inbreaking of God's *basileia* (kingdom, rule, reign)⁶ and emphasizes the character of Jesus' ministry and the good news that he brings: God's rule is established on Earth.

2. Especially have I learned a great deal from my colleague David Rhoads, whose engaging work on narrative and the oral performance of the Gospel of Mark has rekindled my interest in this Gospel. See David Rhoads, et. al., *Mark as Story*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

3. David Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 151.

4. The lectionary cycle for this year includes several opportunities to preach from sequential passages in Mark's narrative; e.g., Epiphany 3–7 (Mark 1:14–2:12); Proper 11–16, 25–30, 31–33.

5. The phrase υἱοῦ θεοῦ (Son of God) is omitted in some early manuscripts, although many English translations retain it. The text-critical issues are complicated and are not addressed here.

6. The *basileia* is not the place where a king (or queen) rules but rather the reign or rule. When Jesus proclaims the *basileia* of God, he is saying something about the character of God's reign and its establishment on Earth. See, e.g., John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 71; also Brian Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 51.

Six mysteries exemplify this reality and lie at the heart of Mark's portrait of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

The mystery of baptism: the baptism of Jesus leads to new life . . . but only through death

Mark's careful composition of Jesus' baptism rivals that of a movie director who wants to ensure that the setup of a shot captures the underlying truth of the scene. The same rapid-fire intensity of events at his baptism and the beginning of his ministry is paralleled by the events with which Jesus' earthly ministry ends. At his baptism, Jesus rises up from the Jordan river and immediately sees the heavens ripped open (*schizo*). The Spirit (*pneuma*) plummets into him, and a heavenly voice declares "this is *my* Son" (1:9–11). This fusion of action and vision inaugurates Jesus' earthly ministry and previews its end. In the end, it is Jesus' voice crying out in agony to the very God who had marked him with the Spirit and appointed him as God's own child. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34) "My" Son; "my" God. The relationship established and affirmed by God at the beginning is sustained by Christ to the end, even in his moment of abandonment on the cross.⁷

With his last breath (*ekpneō*, from the same root as *pneuma*), another rupture occurs. This time, not the heavens but the curtain in the Temple is ripped apart (*schizo*), and the centurion declares "Truly, this man was Son of God" (15:39). The verbal links between baptism and crucifixion frame Jesus' earthly ministry and remind Mark's hearers that baptism into God's reign is a baptism into death.⁸ For Mark, to confess Jesus as Son of God is to recognize that Jesus is known most fully when he is known as the crucified one.⁹

Jesus' baptism and the call it repre-

sents are a two-edged sword for the preacher, who must discern where to let the accent fall—on life? on death? As dramatic as these baptismal events are, and as much as some may long for equally dramatic experiences of their own, death is a difficult word to preach among those who benefit from their position in a dominant culture of materialism, comfort, and privilege. This was true at the time of Jesus, and it is true now. People find it much easier to refer to "my" God as the God who makes life easier and more comfortable, not the God whose call leads to the cross. Mark reminds his readers that baptism is a radical, countercultural activity, an outward and visible sign that we, too, are called (and empowered) to die to the world's ways. Jesus is claimed by God, marked by the Spirit, and propelled into a ministry that leads inexorably to his death. So, too, are we. At the same time, the events at the Jordan River represent a radical call to *life* within the rule of God. Just as baptism leads to death on the cross, so also does death lead to resurrection: rising from the waters, raised to new life. "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."¹⁰

7. "It is not so much that in the cross God sacrifices God's Son for the sake of humankind, but that in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross God knows the suffering that lies at the heart of humankind." David Bartlett, *What's Good about This News?: Preaching from the Gospels and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 41.

8. Cf. 10:58: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

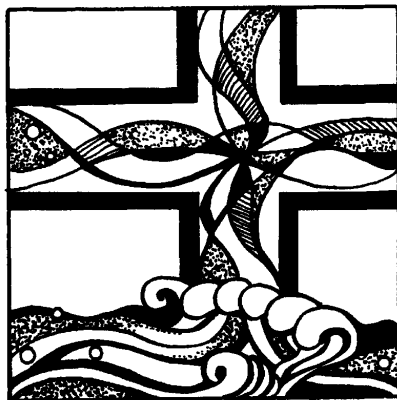
9. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 75.

10. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, rite of Holy Baptism, 124.

The connection between Jesus' baptism and death points to an eschatological future with present implications: now is the time for God's reign on Earth. When the sky is ripped apart, God is no longer confined to heaven. When the temple curtain is torn, God is no longer confined to the holy of holies.¹¹ Ripped heavens and torn curtain testify that the reign of God has drawn near. *God* has drawn near. For anyone experiencing grief, despair, oppression, or marginalization, this is a comforting testimony: God is in charge; consolation is now. On the other hand, with no barrier between earth and heaven God is no longer confined to the safe places¹² of faraway mountain tops, distant heavens, or secret sanctuaries . . . nor to expansive cathedrals, Sunday mornings, or the park at sunrise. If God's rule is being established in place of earthly rule, watch out! God is in charge, the time is at hand, the judgment is now; keep alert! The good news is that we are no longer separated from God; the bad news is that we are no longer separated from God. "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" (Isa 64:1-2)

**The mystery of teaching:
Jesus has a strong reputation
as a teacher . . . but his lessons
are veiled and difficult to
understand**

In Mark, "Teacher" is the address used more often than any other title by those who speak to Jesus: disciples (9:5; 10:35; 13:1), suppliants (9:17; 10:51), and even opponents (12:14,19, 32), the latter with some sarcasm as they attempt to trick him with their legal puzzles. Jesus instructs people within the relatively closed setting



of the synagogue (1:22; 6:2) as well as on the shores of the lake or wherever crowds gather around him (2:13; 6:6). No matter where he teaches, people are astonished at his authority (1:22) and surprised by his wisdom (6:2). If teaching awards were given on the basis of reputation alone, Jesus would have won plenty. Reputation, however, does not guarantee results. For example, some in his hometown recognize that his lessons go hand in hand with mighty works of power, but they still view him as the one they've always known—"Isn't he the carpenter, Mary's son?" (6:3). They are stunned by his wisdom but remain unconvinced by his message.

The limited "success" of Jesus' teaching flows out of his unusual teaching style. His favorite mode of instruction, whether to crowds (4:2) or disciples (4:33), is

11. In the cosmology of the ancient world, heaven and earth are separated by a barrier. When the heavens rip open, God is no longer confined to the heavenly realm. We might say, too, that humankind is no longer confined to the earthly realm.

12. Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark, Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 59-60.

parables: brief stories or images that conceal/reveal their messages in simile and metaphor. Although they tend to reflect familiar scenes from Palestinian agrarian life (e.g., people sowing seeds, a vineyard owner whose son is killed by wicked tenants), parables defy precise interpretation, both by characters within the narrative and by readers on the outside. Jesus' followers are confounded in their attempts to comprehend what he is trying to teach them, unable to understand unless he explains himself (4:34). Ironically, it is in order to conceal his message that Jesus claims to teach in parables: "To you has been given the secret [or mystery] of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (4:11–12). Jesus intends that anyone in relationship with him will (eventually) come to learn the meaning of the parables. Those who insist on remaining "outside" will not.

The multivalent character of the parables in Mark offers promise and challenge to the preacher. The conversation between interpreter and text may uncover a different word on different occasions or to different audiences, and this is even more the case with parables.¹³ Donald Juel suggests that preachers might begin their reflections by asking: Does the kingdom of God have anything to do with us in particular?¹⁴ One way to get at this question is to imagine being inside the story world of the parable itself and to ask: With which characters or images do we most connect? Which ones seem most foreign to us? In what ways does this parable challenge us to change? In what ways might we find comfort in its message?

Given their veiled messages and hidden meanings, parables critique a stance of

certainty and triumphalism. Developing a spirit of humility may help to remind preachers and other interpreters that those who follow Jesus will likely find themselves, at least on some occasions, failing to understand the will of God. Thus, "if God's self-disclosure takes the form of riddle and enigma, there can be no place for smugness or dogmatism in ethical matters. Those who have the rules firmly in hand are those who suffer from hardness of heart" (3:1–6; 7:1–23).¹⁵

The mystery of power: Jesus displays boundless power . . . but always within limits

Whenever I teach the Gospel of Mark, I ask students to read the entire book and list the characteristics of Jesus as he is portrayed in this Gospel. Almost without fail, among the first things mentioned when we discuss the assignment is their surprise that "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" is not at all the person they meet in Mark. Here Jesus is a supersized superhero. He defeats Satan in the wilderness (1:12–13).¹⁶ He commands

13. Although the earliest interpretations of the parables were largely allegorical, interpretive strategies since the beginning of the twentieth century may be divided roughly into two categories: those that attempt to get behind the evangelists, back to "what Jesus really said" (a matter of placing the parables, as much as possible, within their original historical setting) and those that interpret the parables as part of the larger narrative framework in which they appear in a particular Gospel. In my view, both approaches yield interesting results, with insights that may be useful for a particular preaching setting. For a cogent overview of parable research, see David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000).

14. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 129.

15. Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 91.

the wind to “shut up”—and it does (4:39).¹⁷ He shouts down demons (1:25) and sends them on a one-way trip to destruction (5:9–13). He has authority to forgive sins (2:10), and he restores people to wholeness even when he is unaware of their need (5:30). Whatever else is good news in Mark, this most certainly is: in Christ Jesus the people of God have a strong ally in the cosmic battle against everything that separates us from God and from one another. Jesus is empowered by God to do mighty things, and he empowers his disciples to do the same (6:7–13).

However, his superhero abilities go only so far. In the face of their unbelief, Jesus is powerless to do mighty works, with the exception of a few healings, among the people in his own hometown (6:1–5). He repeatedly tries (and fails) to help the disciples to understand his identity and his message; their fear keeps them in unbelief (4:40; 9:32). He does not force the religious authorities to live according to God’s rule, and he cannot stop his own crucifixion. He is unable even to predict the “day or the hour” when the apocalyptic Son of humanity will return in glory (13:26, 32).

Through his limits as well as his strengths, the earthly Jesus inverts the world’s ways of power, and he calls his followers to do the same (10:42–45). Those who hold positions of authority or who benefit from their status are called to share power in relationships of mutual service. They should become like children (10:13–15), give away their wealth (10:23–30), give up positions of prestige, and be servants of one another (10:42–44).¹⁸ It can be a challenge to the preacher to know how and when to help others lay claim to the power that is theirs in the reign of God (e.g., in the face of suffering and injustice) and when to relinquish their power that comes from the world’s rule (e.g., instead of lord-

ing over others). Even more difficult, however, may be the reminder that even when we choose correctly we cannot guarantee the outcome: we are called to be faithful, not to be effective. Violence, war, racism, sexism—each of these is evidence that people still prefer the world’s way of power rather than God’s way. Tsunamis, hurricanes, and drought give evidence that the new life begun in Jesus’ resurrection is not yet fully realized. Cancer and heart disease continue to kill the faithful and fallen alike.

Those who focus only on Jesus’ miracles in Mark do not see him truly, for “power is not self-attesting.”¹⁹ The cross still waits at the end of Jesus’ life, no matter how many demons he exorcises or lepers he heals or storms he stills. Indeed, the cross waits precisely *because* he uses his power to challenge the status quo. This is

16. Despite Mark’s spare account of the Temptation, the narrative makes clear that this is a battle Jesus has won. His first public act, after calling the disciples, is an exorcism in the synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21–28). Word gets around, and before long the scribes accuse him of being in league with Beelzebul: “by the ruler of demons he casts out demons” (3:23). But Jesus, the one whom John the Baptist describes as “more powerful” (1:7), reminds them that “if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come” (3:26). Jesus has bound the “strong man” (Satan) and plundered the house; Satan rules no more. The reign of God is here.

17. I am indebted to David Rhoads for this translation of *phimāō*.

18. Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the NT Writings* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003), 227.

19. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 76. Hays has an excellent discussion of Mark’s portrayal of Jesus’ power as well as the comprehensive “teaching program” that Jesus must undertake in order to teach his followers the character of discipleship that is centered on the cross. See pp. 73–92.

what the world does to those who do not play by its rules. When preaching the Christ whom we meet in Mark, we do well to recall that it is through his death on the cross that Jesus most clearly shows to us the character of God.

**The mystery of suffering:
Jesus alleviates suffering . . .
but he must suffer and die**

According to Mark, Jesus is known throughout Galilee for his ministry of healing (1:8; 6:53–56). A man with leprosy, a woman with an unstoppable hemorrhage,²⁰ crowds in need of cure: they come to Jesus to be made well. His compassion for those who suffer leads him to challenge the pietism of the religious authorities when he insists on healing even on the Sabbath in the synagogue (3:4–6). He feeds the hungry (8:1–10), reassures the fearful (6:45–51), and restores to wholeness those who are tormented, whether their agony is self-inflicted or caused by others.²¹

The first half of Mark's Gospel contains numerous examples of this healing ministry. In the second half, however, the one who offers relief to the distressed tries to focus his disciples' attention away from his abilities as wonder-working healer and onto his own destiny of suffering. After Peter's confession, Jesus begins to teach openly about his impending execution on a cross (8:31; 9:31; 10:33; cf. 9:12). With each prediction of his passion, the details become more gruesome, so that by the last one he is laying out the means of torture: "they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him" (10:34). This man who saves others, it turns out, will suffer more than any of the sick or tormented people he has healed.

Of all the mysteries in Mark's Gospel, the mystery of suffering may be the most difficult to preach.²² If the reign of God is

revealed in and through Jesus, and if he has the power to heal, how does one explain why some people are healed and some not? Why are the lives of some marked by tragedy, while others seem to have a life of ease? In our own day, despite testimonies about miraculous healings, despite accounts of rescue from calamity, despite congregational prayer chains, it remains the case that children still suffer abuse, loved ones still die of cancer, and victims of war still come home in body bags. This side of the Eschaton, suffering persists as a heart-wrenching reality of human experience (see 13:19, 24).

Further, if the reign of God is manifested by the relief of suffering, why does Jesus have to suffer and die? In Mark, as in

20. In a provocative essay that reads Mark 5:25–34 through the lens of Asian women's experiences, Hisako Kinukawa suggests that the suffering endured by the hemorrhaging woman results not only from her physical condition and failed attempts to seek treatment but even more from cultural norms that call her "unclean" and isolate her from the rest of the community. Further, the words, *paschō* (blood (*haima*)), and body (*sōma*) appear in Mark only in reference to this woman and to Jesus, suggesting to Kinukawa that the woman's suffering, and the suffering endured by Jesus, share the same root cause: human expectations and standards. Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 29–50.

21. On this last point, consider the episode about the man who is tormented by a legion of demons (5:1–20). His agony is so great that he hurts himself with stones and breaks the shackles that have been placed upon him, presumably by people who want to ensure that he cannot get too close.

22. David Bartlett says it well: "If the great puzzle of Mark's Gospel is that Christ's death is the sign of Christ's sonship and God's love, the smaller puzzle is like unto it, human life is most alive when we, too, follow in the way of the cross." *What's Good about This News?*, 42.

all the Gospels, Jesus forgives sins (2:5), calls sinners (2:17), and is crucified by sinners (14:41). But Mark, unlike the others, does not explain Jesus' suffering by explicitly connecting Jesus' suffering and death on the cross with the forgiveness of sins. The cross in Mark does not function as the means through which Jesus (or God) forgives sins. Jesus' blood is "poured out for many" (14:24), but Jesus (in Mark) says nothing about sins here. Perhaps this is why the Gospel of Matthew, while repeating the saying, reads: "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matt 26:28; emphasis added).

In any case, when we preach from Mark, we cannot "make sense" of Jesus' suffering, or even our own, by the claim that Jesus' suffering redeems the sins of the world. Suffering is not redemptive in Mark—not for Jesus, and not for his followers. Death on the cross is the result, not the purpose, of Jesus' ministry; it represents the world's response to the ways of God. Those who "take up their cross and follow" will also suffer, not because discipleship is exemplified by suffering but because suffering is "the tragic outcome of following this kingdom-preaching Jesus."²³

Nonetheless, the suffering endured by Jesus and his followers is not without meaning. In Mark, suffering is part of the reality of faithful discipleship. But the followers of Jesus—those with him in Galilee and those with him today—are not left to suffer alone. Despite Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross, the resurrection proves that God does not abandon him. So, too, God does not abandon us. Even with its early emphasis on deeds of power, in the end Mark's Jesus is not triumphalist but starkly down-to-earth. Jesus' response to suffering in Mark provides both example and empowerment for his followers' response

to their own suffering and the suffering of others. People who have the capacity to relieve suffering are called to do so.²⁴ When they cannot heal, they can accompany. Jesus' ministry demonstrates both of these responses as ways of the reign of God. Simplistic at first glance, their complexity becomes apparent whenever one looks at the suffering around them and faithfully begins to respond.²⁵

The mystery of boundaries: Jesus breaks barriers . . . but establishes borders

Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors (2:15). He calls disciples from less-privileged groups within Palestinian society and initiates acceptance of others, even when doing so violates the norms of ritual purity (e.g., the healing of the leper, 1:40ff.) or cultural propriety (4:3–9, the woman who

23. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh*, 60.

24. Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to proclaim the good news and cast out demons (6:7–11): "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (6:12–13).

25. The Christian witness about Jesus' death on the cross and the call to his disciples to take up their own cross grounds astonishing works of charity and sacrifice for the sake of others, instances of the reign of God on earth. At the same time, some churches and individual Christians have twisted Jesus' call to the cross in ways that perpetuate the suffering of others rather than relieving it, usually by way of "naming" the other's experience as "suffering for the sake of Christ." A couple of examples: (1) when the victim of physical abuse is encouraged to stay with the abuser as a way of demonstrating Jesus' love and his capacity for enduring suffering; (2) when persons or groups who benefit from privileges related to race, ethnicity, gender, age, etc., ignore the suffering of others in order to maintain the status quo.

anoints Jesus). Just as God tears down the barrier that divides heaven and earth, so Jesus tears down barriers that divide people.²⁶

The healing of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20) is one example. Jesus traverses the physical boundary of the Sea of Galilee to go “to the other side” (5:1; cf. also 6:45; 8:13)—to Gentile territory, outside the borders of the Jewish people. There he encounters a distressing scene. Tortured by demons and separated from family and friends, a man lurks among the graveyard dead, howling against the night. Strong enough to shatter chains that bind his body, he cannot break free from the demons inside. Jesus commands the demons to leave and drives them into a herd of pigs, restoring the man to sanity. As Mark relates the episode, its significance is not simply that Jesus has performed yet another successful exorcism but that the man is reinstated in his community as a result. “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you” (5:19). Rendered an outsider by the demons, the man becomes an insider by Jesus’ boundary-crossing mercy.

A ministry that shatters boundaries creates frightening new borders of inclusion. When Jesus welcomes sinners into his circle, those who consider themselves to be righteous and without sin put themselves beyond it. His insistence that God’s reign expands the notion of “family” means that his mother and sisters and brothers must share whatever privileges they might have as his relatives.²⁷ Sometimes the borders are expanded so much that persons will choose *not* to join the circle. During a Sabbath-day encounter with a man with a withered hand, Jesus asks the Pharisees, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” When he answers his own question by healing the

man, the Pharisees conspire to destroy him (3:1–6). They would rather kill Jesus than violate the Law—a Law originally intended to help the people of Israel remain inside the covenant with God.²⁸ Jesus’ boundary-breaking mission is too great a threat for them.

Preachers will recognize that not everybody hears the barrier-breaking *euangelion* of Jesus as *good news*. Full inclusion of new insiders as true insiders means that the community will be shaped anew by their perspectives, insights, and

26. Kinukawa argues that Jesus broke the barriers for women, but only when challenged to do so by them. The paradigmatic episode is Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophonecian woman (7:24–30). Kinukawa’s argument is beyond the scope of this essay, but her insights from the perspective of Asian women’s’ experience illuminate a number of significant elements of the Gospel of Mark. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, esp. 51–65.

27. In his account of the episode, Mark describes Jesus’ birth family as literally “outside” of the place where Jesus is teaching (3:32–35).

28. Perhaps we should have more sympathy for the Pharisees, particularly because they believed themselves to be offering a faithful interpretation of Scripture: “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy . . . you shall not do any work” (Exod 20:8–10). Their concern to get the rules straight may well be due to the tradition that suggests that the penalty for violating Sabbath laws is death (e.g., Exod 35:2). If they were to agree with Jesus that it is better to heal the man than to obey God’s stated law, they would have to surrender their certainty about what it means to live as a faithful community of God. As debate and discussion around the ELCA sexuality study attest, it is not easy to agree on what constitutes acceptable behavior and practices within a faith community, even when Scripture has something to say on the matter. It is no wonder the Pharisees were afraid of Jesus and the crowds that he attracted. (See 11:18, 32; 12:12).

actions. Long-established insiders (by virtue of gender, ethnicity, ability, age, education, and so on) may find it difficult to share the power and give up the prerogatives that come with that status. At the same time, cultural constraints can become so internalized that persons who have been marginalized may find it difficult to claim their place inside the circle. Even those who welcome the expanding borders may discover that their assumptions about inclusivity differ from the assumptions of others. It can be scary and difficult to reach across the barriers that divide us from one another. Nonetheless, the preacher's task, it seems to me, is to proclaim Christ's boundary-breaking message and trust the power of the gospel: "The reign of God has come near; repent and believe the good news."

The mystery of absence: Jesus is raised . . . but he is not here

The ending of the Gospel of Mark has no great commission to the disciples (Matthew), no roadside chat with travelers en route to Emmaus (Luke), and no comforting encounter between Jesus and Mary in the garden or nail-hole proof for Thomas's sake (John). Mark ends without narrating any resurrection encounters between Jesus and his followers. Instead, readers are left with an empty tomb, a mysterious messenger, and a group of women who are too frightened to talk. Absent from the scene is the resurrected Christ.²⁹

When the women go to the tomb after the crucifixion, they expect to find a dead body.³⁰ Imagine their shock when they see, instead, an empty tomb and a man dressed in white who stuns them with his news: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his

disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." The form of the Greek verb "to crucify" refers to an event that happened with effects that still carry on into the present: "Jesus . . . the crucified one. He has been raised, he is not here." Perhaps one of the greatest mysteries in the Gospel of Mark is the assertion that the followers of Jesus, then and now, must live during a time in which Jesus is absent. The tomb is empty . . . he is not here.

In what way is an "absent" Jesus anything like good news? The other Gospels all have two pieces of evidence that complete their narratives: the experience of the empty tomb, followed by resurrection appearances. Mark also has two pieces of evidence: as in the others, an empty tomb; unlike the others, no appearances, but a promise: "he is going ahead of you." In Mark, Jesus is really absent—no Paraclete as in John; no Pentecost as in Luke-Acts; not even an "I am with you always" as in Matthew. In Mark, Jesus is not "with" you

29. Further, Mark does not illustrate how Jesus will be present in the church after his earthly ministry is completed. In Matthew, Jesus is at hand in the gathered community ("wherever two or three are gathered") and in the mission of the church ("Go, make disciples of all nations . . . I am with you always until the end of the age"). In Luke Jesus is made known to his followers in the breaking of the bread, and the Spirit empowers them to engage in the ministry of Christ until his *parousia* (Acts 2). John's Jesus sends the Paraclete, who will continue to teach the community after Jesus has returned to the Father. Each of the writers deals differently with how Jesus is present to the believing community after his death and resurrection. They offer a word of hope to readers living in the in-between time, a time when the church follows a Christ who has left the earthly ministry behind.

30. They are carrying spices to anoint his body (16:1).

The messenger at the empty tomb tells us “how” to preach (and to live): Do not fear! Look! Go! Tell!

in the ways he is in the other Gospels. In Mark, the good news is that he is “ahead of you” in the life that the followers are called to embrace. “There you will see him.”

The Gospel that began in Galilee points back to Galilee. When the followers of Jesus go to the tomb, expecting to find a place of death, they are instead pointed back to Galilee, to a place that has, for them, become the place where they experienced in Jesus’ ministry the fullness of life. (The crucifixion took place in Judea; resurrection returns him to Galilee.) The ministry that began with a promise—“the kingdom of God is at hand”—ends with a promise—“there you will see him.” The narrative leaves open the possibility that “where” they will see him will be in the very fulfillments, paradoxes, and mysteries they experienced in his ministry. There is absence but not abandonment. He is not, in Mark, “with” them, but he is ahead of them. If they continue to follow after him, any second they might run into him as the reign of God comes into its fullness.

In Mark, the women go to the tomb expecting to find a dead Jesus. They discover that Jesus is not there, but death is not there, either. Death has been stripped of its power to overwhelm the followers of Jesus. If Christ “goes ahead of us *in death*, can

there be any doubt that he will be there ahead of us wherever life might take us?”³¹ The good news is that Jesus “will go ahead of us into a new career, a new family, an unexpected change in our physical health, or our financial circumstances. There is no place you can think of, no limb you can climb out on, where Jesus hasn’t already been.”³² Further, the defeat of death by Christ Jesus leads us to minister, as Jesus did, to the poor, the oppressed, the diseased, the outcast, the shattered and destroyed lives we otherwise want to keep at a distance. In those places, in those ministries, in those lives, as was always the case in Galilee, we will see Jesus.

Conclusion

The final message of Mark, delivered by the young man at the tomb, offers a series of imperatives: “Don’t be alarmed!”—he told you this would happen. “Look!”—there is the place they laid him. “Go!”—away from this place. “Tell!”—his disciples that he is going ahead of you. In the midst of the paradoxes and the mysteries entailed in Mark’s narrative about Jesus, as one tries to discern “what” to preach, the messenger at the empty tomb tells us “how” to preach (and to live): fearlessly (do not be alarmed), with eyes wide open (look), with a direction (go), and with a responsibility (tell). Do not fear! Look! Go! Tell! This is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God: a paradoxical, mysterious gospel and a paradoxical, mysterious Christ call us to proclaim and live into the reign of God.³³

31. Sally Bates, “Fill in the Words: Mark 16:1–8,” unpublished sermon preached for Easter sunrise service, March 31, 2002.

32. Bates, “Fill in the Words.”

33. I am indebted to Frank Crouch for his helpful comments and feedback on this essay.



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